Post-communist Tirana: lost in transportation

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Abstract

In this paper I will present the current situation in Tirana related to international buses and the lack of the bus station. The city has experienced changes and development after the fall of communism, trying to catch up with Western neo-liberal cities. One of the main features of globalization and contemporary cities is mobility of people, goods and information. In Tirana the mobility of people as such exists, but unlike other cities even in the region there is not a central bus station that regulates the information about travelling. I will try to analyse this phenomenon by focusing on the transition period and urban planning and to see what actually this tells about the capital city and its citizens. The methodology used is desk research and observation, by using the city as a case study. The paper mainly uses concepts of Auge, Lefebvre and Amin and their theoretical approaches to analyse cities.

Key words: Tirana bus station, space, non-space, post-communist transition, South Eastern Europe, transport, urban planning.

Introduction

It has often occurred to me to meet people who were doing their Balkan tour and to get surprised that most of them wanted to visit Albania, but could not, unless they were driving their own car, or taking a flight. And as I was always trying to convince them by offering my help, I realized that some of the travellers avoided

traveling to Albania because of the lack of information. Since I spent almost all my life in the country, I could not grasp what they were referring to as "lack of information about public transportation". As Massey points out, order and chaos are relative concepts since they depend on the individual and their everyday interaction. (Massey: 2005) What the tourists always complain about and refer to as chaos is the lack of a main bus station in Tirana. This is true, the city does not have a main bus station, and therefore one must be a local in order to have the information about inter-city and international transport.

In this paper I will analyse how Tirana dealt with the process of urban changes during transition, taking as case study the lack of a central bus station. How do citizens access the necessary information? What kind of relations are at stake? What does the lack of the station as geographic public space effects local citizens? How is the city situated in the process of globalization? In order to answer these questions, I will use secondary resources such as academic papers, books and scholar publications. Secondary resources will be combined with my experience and will be used to explain certain processes that are taking place in the city.

In this paper I will take into consideration also the issue of post-communist cities and the transformation that happened after the fall of communism. More specifically, I will write about urban transformations that occurred in Tirana after 1991. The city faced rapid changes that were supposed to bring the citizens closer to Western World. However, because of the uniqueness of the previous regime, compared even to other socialist states, changes in the capital city of Albania have some special features.

The paper will mainly use concepts of Auge, Lefebvre and Amin and their theoretical approaches to analyse cities. Firstly, there will be presented the general frame of transition in post-communist countries and the effect in cities, with a focus on Tirana. Further, the paper will take into consideration the case study of Tirana and the absence of the bus station. Finally, I will try to see how this informal bus station affected mobility and what its political and economic effects are for citizens.

Transition and the city:

The fall of communism in Albania, as well as in other Eastern European countries was followed by quick political and economic reforms. "Like the ambitions of most uprisings in history, the goal of the 1989 revolution was to undo the old system by tearing down the tenets of a crumbling political structure." (Stanilov, 2007: 21) Transitions in post-communist Europe have a similar feature: the main focus was put in economic and political issues. Cities in these countries faced a

rapid growth of population, since migration within the country became a common feature. The new comers in the city settled in the suburbs, where new buildings were constructed. In the case of Tirana, the city has faced an increase number of population. "Since the fall of communism, according to official statistics, Tirana has doubled in population. However, this total only includes formally registered residents. Unofficial sources estimate this figure at one million[1]." *(Pojani: 2)*

The capital city faced quick increase in informal areas. The surface of the inhabited city area almost doubled, but the main face of post-communist urbanization of Tirana, are the informal areas. This refers to the fact that after the fall of communism the living area of the city expanded in the suburbs, but this process involved illegal construction. One of the biggest problems of the city is the unregistered inhabitants, therefore until recent years basic services such as addresses and postal services were almost impossible. Inhabitants had to count on local postmen and their abilities to know where the inhabitants live in that neighbourhood, although this has been challenging. The areas now after all these years are registered and have street names.

Another feature of the post-communist city is directly related to the change of the previous political system. Economic and political reforms in post-communist Europe had to deal with processes of privatization. So, the cities dealt with a decrease in public services, while private sector is still boosting. The developments do not occur in the city centre but in the periphery. "Just as the socialist government preferred to direct its attention to the urban periphery, where the majority of the large housing estates and giant industrial zones sprung up, most of the energy of the post-socialist growth has been channelled to the suburban outskirts, where new shopping centres, office parks, and clusters of single family residences have popped up, leaping over the belt of socialist housing estates."(Stanilov, 2007: 8) The economic reform requires a renewal of private property, which in Albanian communist state was totally erased. Differently from some Eastern communist systems, the Albanian one was one of the most isolated and totalitarian one. Therefore, private property was totally erased.

"The illiteracy in the country immediately after World War II was as high as 80%... This is related to the existence of a traditional and very patriarchal society in pre-war Albania, where female illiteracy was 90% … The country's economy was totally rural and backward." (Gjonça, 2001:44)[2]The communist regime brought the massive industrialization process. Most of the cities took the shape that they have today during the early phase of the communist regime. Tirana was of course in centre of attention; since the first university was build there. Also, the modern architecture and functionalist buildings, related to the concept of Le Corbusier,

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[1] *https://www.academia.edu/2098755/Urbanization_of_Post-communist_Albania_Economic_Social_ and_Environmental_Challenges*, last accessed 20 January 2015

[2] Sentences in between these sentences were deleted by me in order to show the point of my argument.

were spread all over the country. Growing and fast industrialization required creation of small cities evolving around the factory. The main connections between the cities were the railways. Private cars and buses were not an option for citizens. So the main national public transportation was arranged through trains.

When it comes to movement of goods and people Tirana and Albanian cities experienced a severe system of control and surveillance. Movement from one city to another where mainly by bus and train. However, it was not always easy to commute from one city to another. Some special cities, which were developed after the fall of communism, were serving only as military basis. In order to travel into border areas of Albania, the citizen must have a special permit. Therefore, the direction and surveillance of citizens' movements were regulated by the state. The most, important feature is that trains were used to travel only inside the country. Even nowadays there is no railway that connects Albania with neighbouring countries. The only international one build in 1980 with Montenegro was used only for freights. Stanilov while citing Dingsdale is very appropriate to explain the lack of railroads with neighbouring countries "Urban form has been often described in social theory as a passive element of our social existence, a mirror reflecting past and present socio-economic conditions, or a "text" serving as a basis for their interpretation."(Stanilov, 2007: 5)

The fall of communism and the transition brought back the private property, but as well as the shift from "the big brother" [3] as the state, into "big brother" as the market. Travelling within the country was shaped by the "chaos" of the new system. Railroads and train stations were rarely used and until now, nothing is done to renovate this sector. A new order within this chaos took place: travelling by using local social interaction. The lack of informational screens does not seem to stop the flow of travellers. Thus, the idea that airports and stations are "non-places" seem to be challenged by this practice, which shows to be "place" and "non-place" at the same time.

How is the space divided: factual information?

The concept of the station as we use it in our everyday life has already gained an association with a certain building. So, there should exist some sort of physical boundaries that represent the place called station. Secondly, temporality of the people in the place is crucial. Stations are transit points; this is the specificity of it as a place. "The specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a

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[3] I borrow the concept of "big brother" introduced firstly by George Orwell in his novel "Animal Farm" (1946), in order to refer to the surveillance of citizens, which I consider to be present in both communist and capitalist society but performed by different authorities. First one refers to the state and its apparatus and second one to market forces.

specificity which results from some long, internalized history." (Massey, 1993: 69) So the specificity of every space is its everyday reproduction. The area in Tirana used as a bus station reproduces itself as such, through new interactions that take place there.

In the image below, it is presented one of the sides of the Boulevard "Zogu I", which starts from the National Museum towards the old train station. It is in this street that all travel agencies are located and the buses, according to the hours are staying in specific parts of it. From 2017, Tirana has changed the system and there are three main terminals the one for buses traveling to east south, North and South. Nevertheless, there are still no information on schedules and only few information about the location on online forums and travels portals.

There are no big screens with information, but the role of screens is played by travel agencies and also direct contact with drivers. This shows actually that in terms of this kind of transportation, kinship is important or at least acquaintances. Some tourists have tried to put information according to their experience in travel forums. This particular space of Tirana serves mainly for this purpose. Exchanges, tourist agencies and small fast food and bars, hotels can be found in that street. This shows how the place got shaped as a typical station, which would have most of these elements coordinated by a central authority.

The place is socially produced through the movement of bodies, if we use the terminology of Lefebvre. "Rhythm analysis plays an intrinsic part in exposing the social production of space for Lefebvre. Indeed, rhythm analysis seeks to capture empirically the embeddedness of social relations in the sensory make up of space." (Edensor, 2010: 24) So during transition this area saw the emergence of market forces and the authority (state and municipality) did not intervene with any urban planning. The place keeps producing itself as such and most of drivers refer to it as the station, which shows that relations and interactions actually construct the identity of the place.

The plaza as space and non-space

"Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations are ceaselessly rewritten." (Auge, 1995: 79) The urban anthropologists' concepts will be necessary at this point of my analysis, given the fact that his concepts are directly connected to areas like airports, railway stations and so on.

In his book "Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Super modernity. Cultural Studies", Auge introduces us to the new concept of non-place, by taking

into consideration also the difference between space and place concepts, firstly introduced by Michael de Certeau. Auge brings into the theoretical debate an interesting approach to analyse flows and the concepts of place in our everyday life. Auge differentiates the concepts of geographic place as we refer for example to the bus station geographically, and anthropological place. (ibid: 78) This is the revolutionary momentous that Auge brings into the field of studies.

Anthropological place as a concept refers to human relations and interaction with the place and in the geographic place. Auge in his book defines that "place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity." (ibid: 77) Auge explains that non-place is the measure of time and our interactions within it. Therefore, travelling and constant movement is the ideal version of this non place. "The traveller's space my thus be the archetype of a non-place." (ibid: 86) Deducting from Auge's conclusion, one can simply claim that stations, airports and these transitional spaces are actually non-places too. But what does this say for Tirana and the lack of the main bus station, but a well-functioning connection with neighbouring capital cities?

As it is mentioned in the previous section of this paper, during transition the main train station was almost out of use and citizens started using buses, operated from private companies. These private companies, especially the ones that travel to Skopje, Greek cities [4] and Prishtina have almost a common meting point. This has the city centre and precisely the plaza behind the National Museum until 2017 and currently speaking the Palace of Sports. The lack of a main regulatory institution, which will deal with logistical problems of the "typical" order in a main station, does not seem problematic.

Typical order of a main bus station consists on having an information desk, ticket desks also, specified departure places for specific buses. Moreover, the necessity of a regulator is more present when it comes to information about bus numbers and gates. Of course, for tourists a website is necessary. All these regulatory features of a bus station are lacking in the case of Tirana, which should not create to the reader an image of a less industrialized capital city compared to other cities in the Western Balkans. Order is actually put by the private travelling companies and citizens' needs to travel. "As Lefebvre has pointed out urban is the area where 'claiming the right to the city' takes place." (Kuyumlu, 2013: 1) Given the fact that not even the most current master plan of the city[5], which includes a project for tramway in Tirana, has not mentioned anything about bus station, means that citizens approve

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[4]   Massive migration in Greece and Italy was another feature of Albanian transition. Mostly, migration was illegally done, but as soon as emigrants were settled and had regulated their stay, the need for connections with Albania was born. So, private companies started operating connecting Tirana with all big cities in Greece. Offices and departure places are in the same segment of the Boulevard.

[5]   http://grimshaw-architects.com/project/tirana-masterplan/ last accessed 28th January, 2015

this order imposed both by their need but also by companies. "The main direction of urban spatial restructuring could be defined as a transfer of assets, resources, and opportunities from the public to the private realm." (Stanilov, 2007: 10)

The struggle for information that tourists have to deal with was unfamiliar to me, until the point I found myself as a tourist in my own city. I then realized that for foreigners it is even more difficult to access the information. I got to know the "ghost" station while I was trying to get some information about buses that go to Skopje and Prishtina. As I was walking in that part of the Boulevard starting from the museum until the old train station, realised that actually that space is the real bus station. Every company has a specific spot in the street, and the destinations are also split pretty logically.

Considering the concepts of Auge, I would argue that this space in city centre is actually both place and non-place. It is a geographic place, but also an anthropological one. Given the fact that place is about relations this "ghost" bus station functions well and apparently effectively thanks to the personal relations with drivers or acquaintances that had some previous experience. On the other hand, during a normal day one can observe the travellers with luggage and their flows the same as ones in a normal station.

Questions of urban planning: Consequences of a missing plan

In this final section I will analyse the issue in terms of urban planning of the city. Urban planners in modern cities face different challenges. Moreover, in post-communist transitional cities, urban planners need to equilibrate between new economic reforms and social justice. New system where the city needs to operate imposes changes to cities, on the other hand mobility flows of people requires settling of the new comers in the city. Tirana dealt with this issue after the fall of communism. However, urban planners failed during these years to deliver any concrete proposal regarding a main bus station, which would connect the city with other cities. Furthermore, the connection with neighbouring cities in the region is of an extreme economic importance.

Post-communist cities faced a phenomenon that Stanilov explains as the period of difficulties for urban planners. Basically, politicians took advantage of the situation. "Thus, urban development became characterized by a highly individualized and a rather permissive approach to managing investment decisions, which severely undermined the ability of planners to advance coherent strategies for city growth." (Stanilov, 2007: 414) This spatial conflict between social justice and new needs raised the question of the developments in the city. While, local politicians were dealing with informal areas of Tirana and immediate problems such as informal

buildings, unemployment and internal migration, the need to travel was shaping Tirana's centre. Early year of transition faced illegal economy, common feature for post-communist country. This activity influenced also transportation section, but this paper takes into analyse the actual period when informal activity related to transportation be it urban, inter-urban or international, is already fixed.

Harvey (1996) discusses the issue of city and social justice. His main thesis is that social justice rather than universal is local and contextual varying in terms of individuals, time and place. How does Tirana's bus station stand in terms of these two concepts: social justice and modernity? The fall of communism did not only increased mobility within the country, but for the first time after 46 years Albanian citizens could travel abroad. The old system never saw the need to build a bus station as the ones we see in Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje and also Prishtina. However, going from an isolated country to a liberal democracy requires market economy and a relocation of Tirana in regional and global market relations. Communication is the key to re-integration. Also, communication and transportation, according to Sterne go together. "Communication is best conceptualized as organized movement and action. All movement has a symbolic dimension, to be sure, but movement is also a constructive physical phenomenon." (Packer, 2006: 118)

Harvey takes into consideration seven arguments in order to dissolve the conflict presented above. Given the fact that the plan for the city is missing, I would use Harvey's arguments to argue that the actual functioning does not help the improvement of the city. The economic growth argument (Harvey, 1996: 203) would be of great importance even to local politicians, since the municipality budget would benefit from taxes and fees paid in the station. Not only is the economic argument at stake but also the social justice one itself. Such system based in social interaction that has the form of kinship, damage new and small entries in the market.

Furthermore, this practice represents an opposite model of "a good city" as Ash Amin claims in this book. While reading Amin the reader can notice four elements that according to the author make the city a good one. These elements are called the four R-s: Repair, Relatedness, Rights and Re-enchantment. (Amin, 2006) However the author says that the answers to his questions would require an "urban utopianism" (ibid: 1013) I will give briefly an explanation of the four R-s. Firstly the Repair relates with the facilities that help circulation. Bus stations, tram stops, and public transportation routes seem to fall in this category. I think that this practice of Tirana shows how the city is not good in this direction. If transportation is about facilitating mobility, communication and so on, the city partially failed to do so.

Secondly, Relatedness is connected with the concept of equality. Although relatedness is more connected to the welfare state and the excluded, the public plaza behind the National Museum seem to impose itself even to the ones who

are excluded from the information access. "The result is an equal duty of care towards the insider and the outsider, the temporary and the permanent resident." (ibid: 1015) Relatedness relates to everyone in the city and the tourist, new comer, or even one as a first-time traveller. Therefore, information networks cannot be considered as such.

My experience with the station in Tirana can testify that the city in terms of Amin's criteria can hardly be classified as a "good city". The third element that Amin uses in order to define a city as a good one is "Rights". His concept of rights is also connected with the one introduced by Henri Lefebvre. "The right to participate presumes having the means and the entitlement to do so." (ibid: 1017) Amin would argue in a situation like that present in the capital city of Albania, as a situation where the means are there but being used by people who have access to the information. This practice denies the right of new comers, new drivers and foreigners.

Finally, Amin presents us the fourth R, which is "Re-enchantment". "Re-enchantment in the history of urban utopian thought has tended to focus on a paradise to come, usually around grand projects designed to engineer human life materially, morally and ethically." (ibid: 1019) re-enchantment is not about urban planning rather than sociality. In order for this to become present the public space is needed. The station as the place of social interaction is a form of public space; however, it is the public space similar to ancient agora. It excludes certain categories, which actually do not know how to enter this specific public space.

In another work of Ash Amin, where the author deals with urban public space more specifically, the concept of culture is at stake. (Amin: 2008) Collective culture is produced in public spaces if the latter is well-organized. "Public space, if organized properly, offers the potential for social communion by allowing us to lift our gaze from the daily grind, and as a result, increase our disposition towards the other." (ibid: 6) The ghost bus station in Tirana is a public space, well organized within its internal logic. However, the lack of a visible and formal structure of public space station as such tells us about the collective culture produced in that area.

Firstly, and most obviously is the consumption culture, which is totally in line with the logics of a modern liberal city. Transportation is communication and they both are forms of consumption in our society. Secondly, what does this say about the values of commons? The plaza where the buses wait for passengers is becoming the common area of drivers and passengers, passers-by and people who are drinking something in the terraces. This common space is based on social interaction and getting information from acquaintances. This half form of kinship does not produce a critical view in this public space because as Durkheim has pointed out, the solidarity here is the mechanical one. Organic solidarity is required in order

to produce participation of citizens as such in public space. This lack of collective culture can explain why this problem is not even being addressed publicly. As I already mentioned above, there is no master plan that involves building such station, but there have not been any massive protests from the drivers or citizens related to the issue. This is because the informal station produces itself everyday through interactions but does not produce the collective culture necessary to turn this place into a place of sociality.

Conclusion

The issue of the lack of Bus station in Tirana has always intrigued me. I always wondered what kinds of relations were produced to keep the transportation and mobility alive, but on the other hand no action was taken to improve it. Given the fact that now after transition period the city is integrated in regional economy the need for an organized station is more urgent. Public spaces have a real say about the way we are located in world economy and globalization process. I consider everyday practices of Tirana in this direction as produced by market forces, citizens' needs and maintained by a set of certain interaction. These interactions do in fact produce the same practices as those we face in a normal bus station in other capitals of the region. However, in Tirana inclusiveness is at stake.

Tourists, new comers and new travellers who do not have a previous experience with this practice find themselves lost in transportation, unless they get some information from other people. I have observed most of travel forums and blogs online to see the opinion and experiences of other travellers, especially foreigners. These forums are actually playing the role of the official website that normal bus stations have. It is surprising to see how this system of interactions maintains itself and how online information is making it easier for foreign tourists at least. However, what is disturbing is the local production of this space for the citizens.

Taking into account efficiency and market criteria this space is not able to take the best out of it. Administration of a bus station would make municipality expand the budget, but also ease the flow of tourists, since tourism is the main service Albania is focusing on nowadays. On the other hand, if we leave aside this liberal logic and focus more on the citizens and their relations to the public sphere, this area is constantly reproducing itself with the same logic, but it is not producing a common collective culture of participation. Given the fact that these needs are not being addressed publicly shows that for citizens this is not yet perceived as a problem. Yet, it is from this experience that we understand where Tirana stands in this global network of communication and transportation, which is not by the side of Western cities as most of citizens would expect after transitional period ended.

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